

Walk Your Way to Better Health

According to the American Association of Retired People (AARP) website, walking is the most popular physical activity in the U.S., and it's no wonder why. It's easy, it's cheap, it's gentle on the body, and it's good for people of all ages and almost any fitness level.

Whether you're strolling through a mall, hiking through a park, or walking your dog around the neighborhood, walking lifts your spirits, clears your mind, and improves your health. It also strengthens your bones and muscles, lowers your risk for some diseases, improves sleep, and helps you maintain or lose weight - all without fancy equipment, scheduled classes, or a high price tag.

Yet many of us pass up opportunities each and every day to walk. We drive to nearby places or use escalators, moving walkways, riding lawnmowers, and other modern conveniences that have engineered walking out of our lives.

Getting Motivated

In this high-tech age, that's more challenging than ever to stay active in, we often need motivation to get moving. For Nancy Toto, that motivation was coping with a serious illness.

When Toto got breast cancer 10 years ago at the age of 51, she was determined not to take it "lying down." So she started walking and never stopped.

"After coming home from getting radiation, I'd go walk the campground for more than three miles," says Toto, who lives in a rural area near Belmont, Ohio. "I felt I just had to do something."

Since then, Toto joined a community walking program, setting and reaching a goal of walking 1,000 miles her first year. In 2002, she joined her husband on a five-month trip during which he biked more than 11,500 miles around the perimeter of the U.S. While he biked, she walked - in campgrounds, hotels, laundromats, parking lots - wherever she could.

The Totos also participate in charity walks and they belong to walkers' and roadrunners' clubs. "The main thing is to keep moving," says Toto, "no matter what. Through the aches and pains - just keep moving."

Just Start Walking

A brisk walk for at least 30 minutes at least five days a week improves your overall health.

If you're pressed for time, try two 15-minute walks or three 10-minute walks. Even walking to the bus or train stop counts. The more you walk, the better you'll feel.

Another way to gauge your efforts is in steps. Research shows most people take about 2,000 to 4,000 steps a day. Aim for 10,000 steps a day to really improve your health. It's not as hard as it might sound. A step counter, or pedometer, is an inexpensive gadget that you clip on your waistband to count your steps.

So what are you waiting for? Grab a friend, dog, or hoof it alone. Just start walking!

Hitting the Trails

There are many ways to walk: alone or with a buddy, in a group or with a club. You can hike, power walk, race walk, or mall walk. The nice thing about walking is that you choose what's best for you. For instance, if you used to run, you might choose to power walk. If you're a nature lover, you'll probably enjoy hiking. Where and when you walk, how far, and how fast are also all up to you.

Once you decide what kind of walking you want to do, invest in a solid pair of shoes with good support and tread to prevent falling. An experienced salesperson can help you choose the right shoe and fit.

Some people use walking poles and pedometers, but the only other gear you really need is clothing suited for the weather and a water bottle if you're walking a long distance.

If it's cold, dress in layers that you can remove if you start to sweat. Wear a hat, gloves, and scarf to cover your mouth if it's windy. In hot weather,

wear loose, light-colored clothing and sunscreen. Sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat will protect your face, ears, and neck from the sun. Bright or fluorescent colors, such as hot pink, blaze orange, and neon green will make you easier to spot.

Safety Tips

Whether you're going it alone or are part of a group, remember these safety tips whenever you walk:

- Warm up and cool down. Warm up by walking slowly or marching in place and moving your arms. Then do some stretching for your arms, legs, and back. Repeat the stretches after your walk. Start out gradually and build up speed and distance slowly. A good rule of thumb is the 10 percent rule. Don't increase your walking distance by more than 10 percent a week.
- Drink enough water. This is just as important in cold weather as in warm. Drink eight ounces of water about 15 minutes before a strenuous walk. If it's hot or dry, also drink six ounces every 15 to 20 minutes during your walk. After a strenuous walk, drink at least two cups of water for every pound of sweat you lose. Weigh yourself before and after your walk.
- Use paths and sidewalks whenever available. If you must walk on or near a road or street, face oncoming traffic so you can see drivers and they can see you. Don't walk after dark. Look in all directions before crossing a street or intersection. Avoid dangerous crossings when possible. If you wear headphones, keep the sound low enough so that you still can hear what's going on around you - a horn, oncoming traffic, voices. Stop at curbs and allow yourself plenty of time to cross streets. Mind all traffic signs and signals.
- Stop if you feel nauseous or dizzy, or have unusual pain in your chest or elsewhere.

Buddy Up

Walking with another person or a group can be fun and help you stay motivated and committed to your walking routine. It's also safer. Be on the lookout for chances to meet walking buddies. Maybe there's a fellow dog walker in your neighborhood. Or a coworker who wants to start walking at lunchtime. Whether you're a casual walker, hiker, walk-a-thoner, or

racewalker, chances are you can find others in your community to walk with. And once you start, keep walking!

While we DO realize that physical activity such as walking is a key to living longer, many of us find STARTING a starting a dedicated walking program the most difficult part. It's important to remember that you can start small, and still enjoy big benefits. Small walks each day add up...so get creative, and use walking as a part of your daily routine! Here are some creative ways to increase your physical activity as you accomplish your errands and other tasks.

- Forgot the milk? Put on your walking shoes when you have to make a small shopping trip. Obviously you can't walk to the store when you have a full list of items to lug home. But to pick up just a few things, use your legs instead of your car.
- Take a walk to your local bank branch to do your banking. Check out your neighborhood and use the same thinking for the dry cleaners, post office, barbershop, and other services.
- Meet family or friends for lunch. Mid-day meals tend to be more casual than dinners. So you can dress in comfortable clothes suitable for a walk to the restaurant. If there's a theater nearby, you can top off your outing by walking to an afternoon movie.
- Looking to buy or rent a new home? Consider walking through neighborhoods to survey your options. This gives you time to really see each house as you pass by. You'll notice little details you might have missed if you just drove through. Stop and talk to residents to get a feel for the overall community atmosphere.
- Gather gardening ideas. Find an area with attractive landscaping. Walk along the streets noting flowers, shrubs, plants, and trees you could use at your own home.
- Need a gift? Take a purposeful walk through an antique mall or art fair to get that special item.
- Be sociable. Get outside and say "hi" to a neighbor and chat a while rather than doing a drive-by wave. Make it a point to say "hello" to someone every day.

By walking to take care of your daily responsibilities, you make your time count toward a most valuable priority—your health.

The Numerous Benefits of Walking

If a daily fitness walk could be put in a pill, it would be one of the most popular prescriptions in the world. It has so many health benefits. Walking can reduce the risk of many diseases — from heart attack and stroke to hip fracture and glaucoma. These may sound like claims on a bottle of snake oil, but they're backed by major research. Walking requires no prescription, the risk of side effects is very low, and the benefits are numerous:

- Managing your weight. Combined with healthy eating, physical activity is key to any plan for long lasting weight control. Keeping your weight within healthy limits can lower your risks of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, sleep apnea, and osteoarthritis.
- Controlling your blood pressure. Physical activity strengthens the heart so it can pump more blood with less effort and with less pressure on the arteries. Staying fit is just as effective as some medications in keeping down blood pressure levels.
- Decreasing your risk of heart attack. Exercise such as brisk walking for three hours a week — or just half an hour a day — is associated with a 30% to 40% lower risk of heart disease in women. (Based on the 20-year Nurses' Health Study of 72,000 female nurses.)
- Boosting the level of high-density lipoproteins (HDL), known as "good" cholesterol. Physical activity helps reduce low-density lipoproteins (LDL or "bad" cholesterol) in the blood, which can cause plaque buildup along the artery walls — a major cause of heart attacks.
- Lowering your risk of stroke. Regular, moderate exercise equivalent to brisk walking for an hour a day, five days a week, can cut the risk of stroke in half, according to a Harvard study of more than 11,000 men.
- Reducing your risk of breast cancer and type 2 diabetes. The Nurses' Health Study also links regular activity to risk reductions for both these diseases. In another study, people at high risk of diabetes cut their risk in half by combining consistent exercise like walking with lower fat intake and a 5% to 7% weight loss.
- Avoiding your need for gallstone surgery. Regular walking or other physical activity lowers the risk of needing gallstone surgery by 20% to 31%, found a Harvard study of more than 60,000 women ages 40 to 65.

- Protecting against hip fracture. Consistent activity diminishes the risk of hip fracture, concludes a study of more than 30,000 men and women ages 20 to 93.

The advantages go on and on. Many other studies indicate a daily brisk walk also can help:

- Prevent depression, colon cancer, constipation, osteoporosis, and impotence
- Lengthen lifespan
- Lower stress levels
- Relieve arthritis and back pain
- Strengthen muscles, bones, and joints
- Improve sleep
- Elevate overall mood and sense of well-being.

Keep it Steady

A steady routine is the most important factor in getting the most out of your exercise program. Walking for 30 minutes, 5 times a week is recommended.

Use these tips to keep you on track:

- During your walks, you should be able to maintain a conversation. If you're breathing too lightly, increase your pace. If you can't catch your breath, slow it down.
- Walk around the local area after lunch or dedicate 15 minutes to walking up and down stairs. Climbing is an excellent way to strengthen your heart.
- At night, trade a half hour of TV for a brisk stroll around the block. Take a friend with you for company or get the whole family involved.

The Best Medicine

Any amount of walking is good, but for the best health results, set a brisk pace and walk for 30 minutes at least 5 times a week. Be sure to check with your doctor on the level of exercise that's best for you.

Now that you understand the MANY benefits of walking, and are ready to start, you are probably wondering about equipment...specifically, shoes!

Walking Shoes

You don't need lots of gear or fancy equipment to walk. But you do need a good pair of shoes. The right shoes will be well worth the time and money you spent picking them - you won't get far in shoes that hurt or cause injury.

Foot Basics

They change. As you get older, tendons, muscles, and ligaments in your feet loosen up, making your feet wider. They also can get longer and, after years of use, the fatty pads that cushion the bottoms of your feet can start to thin out. That's why you should measure your feet each time you shop for shoes and look for cushioned shoes that will absorb shock better.

Your foot type matters. Different types of feet feel better in different shoes. Determine what type of foot you have. One way to tell is to put one foot in water and then step on a piece of cardboard or colored paper. Look at your footprint. If you can see most of your foot, you probably have low arches, or flat feet. If you see only the side or very little of your foot, you likely have high arches. You'll be able to see a curved foot if you have neutral arches.

Pain's a factor. If you have back, knee, or heel pain, you're better off with a more supportive shoe with cushioning under the heel, according to Gerald Travers, D.P.M., a board-certified foot and ankle surgeon in Colorado Springs, Colorado. If you have bunions (swelling and enlargement of the big toe joint) or other pain in your big toe joint, like arthritis or gout, you should stick with a softer, wider shoe.

Also think about environmental needs before you choose shoes, advises Travers. If you live in a very rainy climate, for instance, you'll want to make sure the shoes you buy are waterproof. If you live in a cold climate that gets a lot of snow, having shoes with good traction also is important. And if you're an experienced walker who treks an hour or two five or seven days a week, you'll need a more protective shoe than someone who doesn't walk as much. Those will cost you more.

Shoe Shopping

You're likely to have better luck getting a good-fitting shoe if you go to an athletic shoe store. Ask friends or people in your walking group or health club to recommend a good store and knowledgeable salesperson.

With all the athletic shoes on the market today, it's easy to get confused about what to buy. While you can wear a running shoe - which has extra cushioning - for walking, avoid other athletic shoes, like tennis or basketball shoes. Unlike walking shoes, which are made for back-to-front movement, court shoes are designed for side-side-movement and quick stops and pivots.

The most important things in buying a shoe are comfort and fit. Look for a shoe with a good rigid sole - one that's not super flexible, recommends Harold Glickman, M.D., a foot doctor in Washington, DC. "The first thing you want to do with any shoe is flip it upside down and see how flexible it is." For daily walking, says Glickman, you want a lace-up shoe with some flexibility that is going to protect the foot.

Always start out by having your feet measured, even if you think you know your size. If one foot is bigger than the other, go with the larger shoe size. But because shoe sizes and designs vary by company and the country they were made in, always go by how they feel, rather than size alone. "We need to take responsibility for making sure we size our shoes well ourselves, no matter what the size of the shoe says," advises Travers.

Once the shoes are on, see how they feel. Check for:

- Width. The wide part of your foot should fit comfortably in the wide part of the shoe when you're standing.
- Length. Scuff your shoe against the floor. If you feel pressure against your toe when you do this, the shoe is going to be too tight - go a half size bigger.
- Slipping. Make sure your shoe isn't slipping around in the heel.

More shoe-buying tips:

- Account for swelling. Shop for shoes at the end of the day or after a workout when they are largest.

- Bring innerwear. Try on shoes with socks or any special inserts you normally would wear.
- Take the wiggle test. If you can't wiggle your toes inside the shoes, they're too small. You should have about a half-inch - about the width of your thumb - between your longest toe and the end of the shoe.
- Take a walk. Walk around the store in both shoes. The shoes should feel comfortable from the start. Don't expect to "break them in."

A Word about Socks

The kind of socks you wear are a matter of personal taste. For instance, while some people like thick socks, others find them uncomfortable. The rule on socks is that "the sock and shoe should combine to fit the foot like a glove," says Travers. "You have to choose your sock based on personal comfort and protection."

But when it comes to fabric, choose socks made of Thorlo, advises Glickman. A combination of acrylic, nylon, and spandex, Thorlo socks help keep your feet dry and provide extra padding for comfort. You can find them at athletic stores for about \$10.

Take your time choosing and buying walking shoes and socks. And don't be afraid to spend a little more money for added comfort. Having the right fit is worth it.

Adapted from: American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons; Mayo Clinic
AARP's Physical Activity Programs. www.aarp.org